Case study 1: Japanese Canadians

Japanese Canadians have lived in Canada since the 1870s. Most of them lived in British Columbia, where they worked as fishers, farmers and business owners. Racism against Asians led the BC government to ban Japanese Canadians from voting, which in turn affected their federal voting rights. During the Second World War (1939–1945), when Canada was at war with Japan, the democratic rights of Japanese Canadians were further restricted. For perceived security reasons, Japanese Canadians were forcibly relocated away from the Pacific coast and barred from voting federally, no matter what province they were in. It wasn’t until 1948 that Japanese Canadians were finally granted full federal and provincial voting rights.

In the years that followed, Japanese Canadians never stopped asking for an apology. They finally got one in 1988, when the federal government formally apologized for past injustices.

Source: JCCC Original Photographic Collection, Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, 2001.4.119
Japanese Canadians living in British Columbia get the federal vote when Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s government brings in a new Canada-wide electoral law that prevents provinces from excluding any ‘class’ of citizens.

Japanese Canadians are still denied the provincial vote in British Columbia.

Tomekichi Homma takes his legal fight to vote in British Columbia elections all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, which rules in his favour. This decision is later overruled in England. Japanese Canadians continue to be excluded from voting provincially in BC.

During the First World War, Japanese Canadians join the military to fight for Canada. These soldiers and all Canadian military serving overseas can vote in the 1917 federal election.

Prime Minister Robert Borden’s government passes a new federal election law. It states that a person cannot vote federally if they are not allowed to vote provincially due to their race. This means that Japanese Canadians in BC are again denied the right to vote federally as well as provincially.

Japanese Canadians living in other provinces have the right to vote, but there are very few of them outside BC.
The Japanese Canadian Citizens League sends a delegation to the House of Commons to request the right to vote. Prime Minister Mackenzie King says he had not known they wanted to vote.

They are allowed to speak before a special committee, but do not succeed in getting the federal vote for Japanese Canadians.

After Japan attacks Pearl Harbor in the Second World War, Canada declares war with Japan. Japanese Canadians are seen as a security threat, and racism gets worse. Twelve weeks later, the Government of Canada orders all Japanese Canadians to be moved from the BC coast and confined in internment camps.

Canada is still at war with Japan. Parliament changes the elections law so that Japanese Canadians who have been moved from British Columbia are not allowed to vote federally, no matter where they live now.

After the Second World War ends, Parliament gives Japanese Canadians the right to vote in federal elections again.
The Canadian government formally apologizes to Japanese Canadians for denying them their civil and democratic rights. Here Prime Minister Brian Mulroney signs the apology while Art Miki, President of the National Association of Japanese Canadians, looks on.